# Study on Language Output: Role and Ways to Realize Its Value in the Classroom

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*Abstract*—**As language teaching practice is beginning to shift its focus from teacher's instruction to students' learning by way of giving more weightings to learner practice of skill training and learning, this paper is a discussion about the role of language output through speaking and writing, before reviewing the concept and types of output with an object in realizing its value by encouraging learners to take time to speak and write, thus to help them learn an L2 successfully.**

*Keywords—language output; value realization; speaking; writing; effect in the classroom*

## I. INTRODUCTION

One thing that distinguishes the traditional teaching methodology and the communicative approach is the degree to which output in the classroom is emphasized. The former gives more weightings to comprehensible input as is believed to enhance SLA, and the latter to output as is considered not only to be closely correlated to communicative fluency, but also to linguistic accuracy, according to Swain (1995).

Input, and comprehensible input, too, do not seem to be much difficult to understand now with the help of a lot of literature (see Ellis: 1985; Krashen: 1987; Spolsky: 1989; Johnson: 1995; Kramsch: 1995; Peacock: 1995; Skehen: 1996; Richards: 1998). Output, however, proves to be much valuable for language learning on the one hand, and still remains an open controversial issue with regard to its supporting evidence (see Ellis:1995), its functions and its relationship with input in ELT practices in particular on the other hand.

In this paper, a few basic issues concerning output are discussed: definition of output; types of output and functions of output.

## II. OUTPUT AND OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS

It is not much, in a way, what is not output as what it is with respect to language comprehension and production. The term alone suggests that it is, opposed to input, related to language production in which something vocal or symbolic is uttered. Therefore, output is not input, not even in the sense that input for one interlocutor is output for another. It is not static, not what is already taped or written. It is neither take-in nor comprehension, although it is for others to take in or comprehend. In addition, output does not seem to work alone the way input does not. In general, it does not work on its own without any interlocutors or communicative purposes in daily life. In the classroom, however, it does not need to have its interlocutors, or even communicative purposes. For the convenience of the discussion, repetition in any context is not considered to be output but an utterance only.

Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, opposed to Krashen (1985)'s Input Hypothesis and Output Hypothesis, according to Ellis (1994), is put forward by Swain (1985), who argues that ample input does not enhance language acquisition but with the help of opportunities for "pushed output" in which "correct production" occurs. There are quite a lot of grounds for output hypotheses. Krashen, according to Ellis (1994), stresses the importance of output with regard to speaker corrections whereas Swain (1995) has raised three things, functions of output that so far seem to be the most important. One is that the process of output production is one of consciousness-raising, consciousness of language problems and solutions in likelihood. Another is that the process of outputting is for second language learners an opportunity to try language forms that they have learned or even not in and outside the classroom, or an process of hypothesis testing, in Swain (ibid:)'s terms. The third function as is termed "conscious reflection" is using language to reflect on how the learner thinks language, and the target language, to be more exact, works, a meta-linguistic function.

Ellis (1994) says that both Krashen and Swain (1985) attach importance to feedback. The former focuses on corrections and the latter on awareness and reflection. Apart from little supporting evidence, Ellis (ibid:) concludes, by discussing three important questions two of which are closely connected with output, and with accuracy and language acquisition, to be more precise, that output enhances language acquisition in terms of acquired linguistic features more than new features. Swain (1995:141), in line with Ellis (1994)'s claim that output hypothesis is worth further explorations, and in reply to different criticisms (see Ellis: ibid :), states that there is a great need for much discussion as to under what conditions any (all) of the three functions operate.

## III. FEATURES AND CATEGORIES OF OUTPUT

There is much necessity to review and keep in mind the argument discussed above that output, so far as the discussion of what output means is concerned, is totally

different from input, and is to be discussed in the perspective of a speaker and a writer as well. Therefore anything coming from the angle of the listener or reader is regarded as input, and discussed relating to input rather than output. One more thing is that input can be both static as in the form of readings, and even taped materials, and dynamic as reflected in conversational talks. Output, however, does not seem to make much sense if it refers to something kept in print or on record, as most of the time discussions are carried out seen from learners and particularly in terms of sources. Actually, it is a sort of "behavior" that results from [input], "information a person receives", according to Richards, Platt & Platt (1992). Therefore, output, in this discussion at least, does not concern anything static but **dynamic**; it does not concern anything non-human but **human** or **personal** and **interpersonal**. It is noted here that although one learner output can be input for another learner in the classroom, learner input is defined as all sort of information a learner receives and particularly verbal information that strikes a learner's visual and auditory senses (LYL 2004). Output, as is not only opposite to input, but differs in that it does not include recorded material and printout, is defined as verbal responses to input, or any other verbal behaviors caused by different drives.

As for categories of output, there are quite a few types to be discussed as follows. To start with, outputs in and outside the classroom do not differ much by nature, and one reason is that **classroom output** is in most cases a reflection of what really occurs in the classroom contexts; another is that although a lot of output in class is lacking in authenticity, most of it may find its register in language use. Few people may create sentences like "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Chomsky in Chapman: 1984). **Monologue and dialogue as output** seem to differ in that the former is more easily planned and speaker-controlled whereas the latter is more constrained to the interlocutor and time pressure. **Written output** and **spoken output**, apart from the differences discussed by linguists like Bygate (1987), seem again to have time pressure as one of the most striking features to distinguish. Therefore writing, in a sense, is a special form of speaking and written output a new form of spoken output, especially when the common core including basic elements of language is considered. So far as the interlocutor is concerned, there is the teacher output, and student output, but as the focus of the discussion is on learners, output is to be seen only from the angle of learners, thus only **student output** is considered, not to speak of native-speaker output in the NNS-NS interactions in and outside the classroom, and hence **high** and **low achiever output**, **individual learner output** and **group output**. Methodological framework considered, there are **pre-communicative** and **communicative outputs**, the former focusing on structural activities and the latter language functions and communication activities (see Littlewood: 1981). It seems that pre-communicative output takes as much understanding as pre-communicative activities. One feature, however, characterizes pre-communicative activities and thus pre-communicative output. Both give more attention to language form than meaning. Even so, it is argued here that whatever type of output is to be characteristic of verbally

saying something rather than parrot-repeating of human sounds. Actually as much literature attaches much importance to language form by believing that "focus on form within the communicative settings can enhance performance and have the potential of promoting accuracy" (see Swain: 1995: 141). A consideration of language units may lead to **one-member sentence output**, **sentential output** and other forms of **textual output**. If this holds water, then the capacity of language unit in some sense does not really influence the nature of output, but features. Again the classroom happenings say to a great extent that communicative authenticity in the classroom is very limited and pre-communicative activities might be a dominant factor producing a great effect on both language teaching and language learning. Therefore, learners may produce language units like **words, phrases**, and even **sentences as output** not very communicative or interactional with a specific communicative purpose. One more thing concerning language units is the length of output, which term swayed away from the defining features discussed above but well fits in with the basic or original definitions of output in Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of English Language (1997), as is used to refer to (the amount of) information displayed or produced in any form — product and language input for learners in the discussion. Therefore, even if there is, theoretically, literary and nonliterary output, something abstract, it seems that there is not much sense in discussing long and short output as product, but maybe **longtime and time-limited output** as process. In terms of learner output, Swain (1995) argues that language learners in the classroom do not only check their comprehension through output production, but also modify their output by way of feedback in the forms of either clarification or confirmation requests from the partners. Then, classroom learning is characterized by two more features: one of either **unconscious output** or **conscious output**; the other of **output of modification** or **output without modification**. Note that output of modification might play a role of deciding the workings of task repetition with regard to language accuracy and communicative fluency, which is discussed in detail by many an applied linguist like Bygate (1996, 1998). There can be some other types of input, of course, relating to aspects of language like vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, or to the PPP models like practice and production, or to the teaching procedures like Pre-While and Post Lesson Activities. Yet it is likely to attribute more importance to output relating to language functions rather than everything having some connection with it. Hu Zhuanglin (2001) discusses six basic functions of language and therefore there appears correspondingly **output as informative, interpersonal, performative, emotive, phatic, recreational, and meta-lingual**. Specifically there are many other types like **output as complaint, thanks, application, introduction, invitation, congratulations, and love-expression**, and so forth. One difference between the two lies in that the former is more macro-categorized whereas the latter more socially and interpersonally functional, forming only part of the language functions. Actually, different outputs may take on different features. **Poetry creation as output**, for instance, is normally done

under some time pressure, but in general it does not seem to be much recursive, although there is much likelihood. **Academic writing as output** is in some sense under no time pressure, and it is much more rehearsed than composing poetry.

## IV.    FUNCTIONS OF OUTPUT

We have mentioned the three functions suggested by Swain (1985; 1995). Here it might be helpful to review some literature including Krashen (1987).

Language output, as differs from radio technical concept of "a route or pathway by which to send out signals", may work in the way in which utterances are made and/or symbols are recorded. On the other hand, it may also work without any of the two reflections. Instead, output goes as soon as input happens. Or the process of receiving input is most cases the process of neural output, and this might find its stronger evidence in memory. An image or a signal is strengthened not only owing to the nature of input and the nature of mechanisms of the receiver, but also, more importantly, how comprehension occurs. Generally speaking, mere comprehension helps memory, but it is far from enough if long-term memory is expected. Undoubtedly mechanical memory with no help of comprehension may lead to a weaker result. An ideal mode of memory is, in the three representations of discourse (see Carrel:1999), particularly on the surface representations, theoretically, that a combination of comprehension and rapid repetition of neural output, the two of which might function almost simultaneously, so that what is to be memorized is to be strengthened. Definitely this is only workable with a small piece of information or item or limited number of images. When the amount of information increases, neural repetition works even more rapidly, and cognitive strategies may play an even more important role. If this is the case, then one conclusion to be made is that it might be repetition of neural output that plays some role in deciding the nature of memory and distinguishing good and poor memories.

If the above discussion is more or less mechanical, and lacks evidence, then the process of reading might be more striking in suggesting a combination of comprehension and output production, as "comprehension and memory are closely related to each other and much of what of the work need to remember a passage is accompanied when we understand it well", according to Carrel (1999). Apart from the workings of the three comprehension processes, namely surface representations, prepositional representations, and situational representations (Carrel: 1999), which are interactively working, the process of reading is relating to the workings of the three mental structures, that is, the sensory stores, working memory and permanent memory, particularly to the workings of sensory stores in the form of **the reflection of** "sounding", as proves to be workable with primary language learners. When learners arrive at higher levels, they are no longer to be asked to read aloud but most often to read silently. This process is lacking in vocal signals, and it is also lacking in symbolic signals. Yet, obviously it is accompanied by the production of output. First, the comprehension process finds itself in rapid neural repetition

of output, or reverberation, to be more exact. Second, more complex comprehension in the form of schemata occurs, as makes comprehension and output at the same time less mechanical. The thinking process together with the reading process may lead to comprehension. And what distinguishes a good reader and a poor reader is, on the one hand, decided by learners' language levels, and the neural repetition of reverberation, and on the other hand, by the thinking process, a production process using all or relevant background knowledge — schema.

It seems that Krashen (1987) has recognized the paramount functions of both input and output. Yet his confirmation of output is limited. He argues that output production can speed up SLA thus helpful to SLA indirectly whereas input induced by output plays the most important role in the process of acquisition (ibid:). In some sense, this is reasonable and understandable for input is something essential, and language acquisition would not occur without input, as distinguishes the literate and the illiterate people in the world, and those who speak very good English, for example, and those who know very little. Therefore, there would be no language acquisition without language input. Yet, output, as a companion of input, is equally important for language acquisition, functioning in different ways, likely to be more complex than input, from the very beginning when language learning and acquisition happens.

So far we have discussed language input-output in terms of reading, schemata and thinking, which might suggest that neither language input nor output works independently, but interactively, the way "output is behavior that results input" (Richards, Platt & Platt:1992). Actually, output as a behavior is also closely connected with product. Thereafter, Swain (1995)'s assumption is quite understandable that a language user or learner, in the process of output production, is reflecting and testing, which in one sense implies that one of the best ways of improving oral skills is classroom interaction in which process the learner is not only learning how to express what s/he wants to, s/he is also learning ways of doing it.

There is much necessity to review Krashen (1987)claims concerning the role of output, claims ①that output is an indirect contribution made to acquisition and it speeds up the process of acquiring a language; ②that "output may affect the quality of the input directed at the acquirer"(ibid:); that output contributes to the conversational communication indirectly by taking turns; ③that output may play a fairly direct role in acquisition by means of error-correction, which "relies entirely on the student's ability to learn grammar"(ibid:). We have noted that Krashen (ibid:) mainly relates the role of output to acquisition, concluding from the procedure of acquiring a language that input plays a direct role whereas output plays an indirect role. What we think, on the one hand, is that comprehensible input is more basic than output for SLA, as is also the basis of output. On the other hand, output plays a more direct role in acquisition than comprehensible input, particularly in terms of acquiring productive language because output is more directly sensible and the most natural way of learning productive language is

to produce it the way the most direct way of learning how to speak is to speak. As for Kristen's (1987) proof that output plays the second most important role in acquisition because acquisition is possible only with comprehensible input and without output, we think that it only says, partially, the very importance of input, but not necessarily the unimportance of output. The very difficulty of clarification lies in the workings of language on the side of a person who cannot speak, or cannot produce sounds, to be more exact. Thereafter, it is still a long way to go before we ignore the very important role output plays in acquisition for everyone including the sign language users, and those phonetic code challengers.

## V. CONCLUSION

Comprehensible output plays a different role in language acquisition, and an equally important one as comprehensible input for different learners at different stages. Therefore, the problem is not which is more important, but when they are more important and how we give more weighting to them and, more importantly, how we can keep balance between them two in the practice of language learning, another program we are faced in future. Yet, the above discussion with regard to the concept, features, categories and function of language output might indicate that it is certain to come to the conclusion that in an L2 classroom there is a great need to attach great importance to the role of language output, realizing output through speaking and writing and making language teaching and output in particular take effect in the classroom.

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